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Garage band? Try hangar

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For local country-rockers Night Wing, a recent international tour didn't mean sold-out arenas and adoring groupies.



Staff Sgt. Lara Murdiza sings with Offutt Air Force Base's Night Wing band during the group's recent tour of the Middle East.

Instead, it meant 14-hour days in the desert, impromptu shows in the shadows of C-130 airplanes on the flight line, and 24,000 miles of traveling in less than a month.

Welcome to the world of Air Force musicians, a military career field that offers talented musicians a steady gig - and an unusual list of tour stops.

"The most common question we got asked was, 'Where are your roadies?' We were like, 'We actually do it all ourselves, guys,'" said Tech. Sgt. Lori Weber, Night Wing's bassist.

The group returned last month from a 29-day tour that took them from Offutt Air Force Base to Qatar, Kyrgyzstan, Djibouti, the United Arab Emirates and several bases in Iraq.

Averaging two or three shows a day, they played to more than 3,000 troops from a huge stage in Qatar and to two lonesome chaplains on a remote base in Kyrgyzstan who had asked for a quick rendition of "God Bless the USA."

Night Wing mostly plays country and rock cover tunes, but the band tries to inject its own style into whatever it plays.

"The songs end up as our own sound, the Night Wing sound. It's got a lot of country flavor to it, but we also throw some blues in there," said Master Sgt. Doug Montera, the drummer.

The band never uses a written-in-stone song list, but some familiar tracks always seem to make an appearance.

"It seems like 'American Pie' goes over really well, and 'Brown-Eyed Girl' always works," Weber said. "We always seem to close with 'Free Bird' or 'Dead or Alive.'"

Night Wing is part of Offutt's Heartland of America Band, a group of 60 musicians that is one of 12 active-duty Air Force bands employing about 850 musicians.

In addition to their orchestras, the large Air Force bands also generally support a pop ensemble, a jazz group, a marching band and several instrumental ensembles.

The bands try to use music to raise troop morale abroad, boost recruiting efforts at home and improve relations with local communities.

For Night Wing, the smaller, spur-of-the-moment shows on its latest tour were often more memorable than the larger, rowdier affairs.

"The big shows are fun, but we really took away how much more intimate a connection you made with the troops at the smaller shows," Montera said.

"We'd go out and play for the guys too busy at work to make it to the big shows, and they were so appreciative to have the music come to them."

Most Air Force band members enter the service specifically to work as musicians. They don't sign enlistment papers and head to basic training unless they've already passed an audition for a band.

At Offutt, musicians aren't invited for an audition until a screening committee has approved recordings of their work. The Heartland of America Band receives hundreds of applications, but only about 20 musicians each year are invited to audition for a job.

"You have to have one thing you're really strong at, but you also have to be competent enough that you could turn around from the

rock group and play the next day in the orchestra," said Staff Sgt. Jennifer Bales, a trumpet player and Heartland of America's noncommissioned officer in charge of human resources.

A few take a less direct route to the musical service.

Staff Sgt. Dan Bragdon, Night Wing's guitarist, was an Air Force engineer in Minot, N.D., when Master Sgt. Jimmy Weber, Night Wing's musical director and guitarist, caught Bragdon's off-duty blues band playing in a local bar.

"He asked if I'd like to sit in on a Night Wing show the next day, so I played a few songs with them. A few weeks later, he called and said, 'You're hired,'" Bragdon said.

"I've been playing in bands in bars since I was 14, and I've never had the income as a musician that I have now. It's a steady paycheck, and that's a luxury a lot of musicians don't have."

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